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THE GROUND OF THE TIME-ILLUSION.

IDEALISTS, from Plato to the present day, have been in almost complete agreement as to the illusory nature of time. For the most part, however, they have deemed it sufficient to have uttered the condemnation and to have turned to the exclusive consideration of the eternal. But unless we are to adopt an Oriental meaning of illusion as sheer nothingness, and, in terms of it, to suppose time to be completely false, we must regard time as in some degree expressive of reality. A most effective service, then, that philosophy would seem able to render the cause of the eternal would be to find to what degree the temporal is expressive of the real, and how that degree may be made more adequate.

The object of the present paper is to take a step in this direction by tracing the time-illusion to its subjective source. Curiously enough, time, for our ordinary thought, is a veritable Topsy: it has no accountable origin; it just 'grewed.' In other words, it is a form of illusion that we accept as 'given.' Although with respect to most acts and events we search within ourselves for the causes, we regard time as having no connection with our inner selves. It is a distorting medium, like a prismatic glass, through which we look confusedly for the true features of the real; how the glass came to be, we do not know.

For idealism, this acceptance of time as a given datum, inexplicable, external to ourselves, cannot, of course, be final. Time, for such a metaphysic, is a form or mode of conscious life. As, however, it is a form which involves error, it cannot, as to its source, be referred to perfect consciousness. Its peculiar defect, therefore, must be due to imperfect conscious life. It is incumbent, then, upon idealistic philosophy to ask what there is in the imperfect operations of human consciousness that may be regarded as cause of the time-illusion.

The thesis which the present paper will attempt to prove is, that the time-illusion is the expression of the imperfect character of human interest, the imperfection residing in the fact that human interest is of multiple degrees of intensity. That time

has thus its subjective source in imperfect interest will be all that the present paper will be concerned to establish. The paper will, however, in the end, offer a suggestion as to the manner in which the time-distortion, being primarily subjective, may be increasingly corrected, and the human consciousness brought nearer to an adequate expression of the real.

I.

Our first problem is to find the characteristic imperfection of the time-consciousness. In the whole discussion which follows, we shall treat time, not in abstraction from particular experiences (conceptual time), but, concretely, as a particular experience (perceptual time). Regarded in this way, the time-consciousness is imperfect, mainly, in so far as it is *perspective*. Although the term 'perspective' has, in ordinary usage, a spatial meaning, it is nevertheless perfectly applicable to time. In a spatial sense, a perspective experience is one in which *the point of view is determinant of the perceptual values*. For example, spatial things nearer the point from which the vision proceeds bulk larger than those more distant. When, to be sure, we reflect upon such an immediate spatial perception, we make a revaluation: knowing from experience that distance from the point of vision produces the illusion of lessened size, we discount the perceptual effect and estimate the actual size to be other than the immediate experience reports. In other words, our 'immediate' experience is perspective; our 'mediate reflection' corrects the illusion of perspective. The same error of immediacy and correction of the error by mediation are found in our time-consciousness. Temporally, the point of immediate 'vision' is each one's present. It is because, for example, this present moment in which I am writing is my present, that it bulks largest in my interest; it primarily and above all has for me the feeling of reality. My feeling of past and future decreases in intensity as these recede from my present. My present moment may, indeed, be barren and uninteresting; nevertheless I feel it uniquely and supremely. The feeling is one which belongs to no other moment of my life; it is the feeling of a perfectly immediate and undeniable value. I may, indeed, judge

other moments to have contained more of real value; but those moments do not possess the unique *quale* that 'my present' possesses, a *quale* comparable most nearly to the quite unshareable intimacy which I feel in 'my spatial here.' In fact, the 'my now' and the 'my here' are the standing-points from which, spatially and temporally, we see all else in perspective.

Nor is *my* present in any wise equivalent to *your* present. We may both be sitting in the same room and be aware that our presents are 'at the same time'; nevertheless, my present has an unshareable intimacy for me that yours can, for me, never have. I may, in a degree, lose myself in you, but it is always myself that remains, even in you; and the temporal present is still my present.

Thus the temporal consciousness looks out from its own vantage-point, and, with its immediate time-vision, measures values by nearness and remoteness from that point. Hence, as in spatial perception, *the point of view is determinant of the immediate or perceptual values*. But again, just as in spatial perspective we correct the perceptual values by reflection, so too we make correction of our time-consciousness. When I note how my immediate present has a value for me that no other temporal moment, either of myself or of others, can have, I remark how my time-consciousness is assigning a peculiar highest value, not on the basis of any high value of the content, but solely because that content is *immediately present to me*. I note how the 'me' thus accorded supreme value is but the veriest trifle of a me, a vanishing point between a past and a future. I note, too, that in insisting upon my present as against that of all others, my time-consciousness is valuing me as an isolated identity, apart from and exclusive of all other selves, and therefore wholly misvaluing the real me. I conclude, therefore, that the unique supremacy of interest that I have in my immediate present is a false supremacy, because based upon false values; and so I proceed reflectively to correct the error by regarding my real self as not a vanishing present and not an isolated identity, but as effectually living through and even above all time and in all selves. Hence while, in the immediacy of

my time consciousness, I take the present and only *my* present for my standpoint, reflectively, I look with impartial eye upon all time and all existence. And yet, much as I may reflectively make the correction, I never cease, in the immediacy of my experience, to be conscious of myself in a very present and isolated way, and with an interest that uniquely and disproportionately centers in my particular self as exclusive of others. In other words, while mediate reflection corrects the distortion of perspective, it never actually removes the immediate distortion : so, spatially, I see the railroad tracks run together ; I reflect, then, that they are, in fact, parallel ; and yet my reflection does not alter the fact that I still see them run together. Both temporally and spatially, in short, perception, in its immediacy, is perspective.

It is just this centering in the *immediate* interest of the *immediate* self that constitutes the essential falsification of the time-consciousness. The falsification lies in the fact that, from the point of view of temporal immediacy, the importance which we feel to attach to the present depends almost entirely upon the fact that it is *our* immediate present ; it does not depend primarily upon the content or real value of the present. If we could transcend such distorting time-consciousness, it would mean, in this view, that we should no longer experience values on the basis of their immediate presence to ourselves, but on the basis of the actual values themselves.

Thus far, we have treated the illusion of perspective as attaching only to space and time. But when we regard human consciousness more widely, we note that all the immediate attitudes of the human person are perspective ; so that we are led, finally, to conclude that the perspective quality is the typical error of imperfect consciousness.

The act of attention, for example, is perspective. That which lies in the focus of my attention has a peculiar value for me that all that lies more remote does not (in the immediacy of my attention-act) have. As I sit in my room at work, a British minister is addressing Parliament, a Russian general is quelling a mob, thousands of Chinese are dying of starvation, an astronomer is

discovering a comet ; nay, some thousand and more years ago, Brutus stabbed Caesar ; a thousand years and more hence, a great revolution will occur : all these, if they were *my* focus of attention, would be of far greater intensity of interest than my present moment of quiet work. Nevertheless, in the immediacy of my consciousness, *my* focus is *my* most real, and all else has relative unreality. Again, it is the point of view rather than the content that is here determinant of the values. And again, as in spatial and temporal perception, reflection mediates the immediacy. By changing the focus of attention variously, we widen the outlook ; we become less 'provincial' ; we try to take all time and all existence for our province. Yet, vary it much as we may, we never can quite escape the distortion of particular focusing. The multiplication of focal points cannot alter the fact that each focus is still, in its immediacy, perspective. So again, although reflection may to an extent correct, it cannot actually remove, the perspective illusion of our acts of attention.

But the 'chief and captain' of our perspective illusions is the illusion of egoism. It is a typical fact of our human life that each person's interest centers uniquely in himself. Much as I may have been schooled in altruistic or other-regarding motives, it nevertheless remains that the fact that I am I is of an interest to me out of all proportion to the fact that you are you. I may judge your life to be of unspeakably greater value than mine ; I may find in you such riches of life that I hold myself as nothing in your presence. Nevertheless, there is in my existence a feeling of reality such as your existence does not have for me. This feeling of reality is *my unshareable interest in myself*. There is, indeed, a unique experience in which this onesided feeling of one's self is partly overcome. In the love of another person, there is a kind of identification of the lover with the beloved, so much so that the interests of the beloved are the interests of the lover. And yet, even here, it is a question whether there does not always remain in the lover's consciousness of himself an immediacy of selfhood, and therefore, in a subtle way, an intensity of value, with which the beloved can never be invested. As we emphasize this immediacy of interest, we tend, more and more, to be egoists.

When, however, we reflect, we note the falsity of a view which makes each life a center of unshareable interest, and we aim to realize in ourselves the 'life in others.' All our best human effort is in the direction of an escape from the bondage of our over-emphasized, immediate selves. And yet, try as we may, there remains always for us an intensity of interest in ourselves that cannot, in its immediacy, really be shared with any other. Again, our reflective life corrects to a degree the illusion of egoism ; it cannot, however, actually remove the illusion.

It should need no further argument, then, to show that the illusion of perspective is the typical human imperfection. It should be clear, too, that the time-illusion is not a something apart, inexplicable in purely human terms, but that it is of the very nature of this 'error of vision' which is typically human. If we can discover, now, the subjective source of this error, we shall be able to know, to a degree at least, wherein the time-illusion has its cause within our imperfect selves.

It remains, then, to ask what constitutes the subjective side of the error of perspective. The objective side we have already noted in the fact that the immediate values given by perspective do not correspond to the mediated values. The subjective error, we may say, lies in the fact that every perspective consciousness involves different degrees of interest. My local point of view, my temporal present, my focus of attention, my consciousness of my own existence, are the points of a peculiar intensity of interest not shared by any other points of my consciousness. It is true, of course, that in all consciousness there is of necessity a distinction between immediacy and mediateness of interest : if I am I, and you are you, I can never really be conscious of you as you are of yourself. Immediacy and mediateness, in short, are necessary complements in all conscious life ; and hence there can exist no error in the mere fact that the interest that I have in myself is different in kind from that which I have in you. The error arises, however, when difference in kind is translated into difference of intensity, when, in brief, my interest in myself is made so to preponderate and to claim a unique intensity that all mediate interests are given false values. This is the typical error of

human time-interest. It translates immediacy of interest into greatest intensity of interest; and so it treats the mediate, which rightly is complementary, as inferior in value.

II.

Difference of intensity of interest, then, is undeniably a subjective condition of the time-illusion. Up to this point, however, we have made no attempt to differentiate time-consciousness with respect to the manner in which it, in its special way, exhibits difference of interest-intensity. We have noted an illusion, namely, perspective-immediacy, common to several modes of our consciousness. It remains now to ask in what unique manner time-consciousness exhibits difference of interest-intensity.

In the first place, time, unlike space, attention, etc., has the quality of 'passing.' Its passing, too, is of different rates. By what means, now, do we measure the particular rates of passing? On the one hand, the passage of time is measured extra-subjectively by the reference of the temporal 'flow' to uniformly recurrent spatial movements. If one swing of the pendulum measured the elapsed moment, my ground for declaring that the present moment is of equal length lies in my noting the fact that it occupies precisely one recurrent swing of the same pendulum. Obviously, however, such extra-subjective measurement of time into equal segments is not a complete or adequate measurement of time. It treats time in a purely external manner as a something resolvable into terms wholly quantitative. It takes no account of the fact that the time-flow has a qualitative nature which varies from person to person and within the consciousness of each person. It aims simply to conventionalize time, to treat only that in it which is universal and public. It follows, then, that the more adequate measurement must treat time, not as an abstraction, but as a personal, qualitative experience. Taken thus, time is no even flow that can be ticked off into equal segments. One hour, by the clock, passes 'like lightning,' while another drags its weary length with untold slowness. If, now, we watch these variations of rate, we note that they are inseparably bound up with the variations of our interest. When I am

intensely interested, time passes with quite unwonted speed; when I am thoroughly bored, it creeps along on leaden feet; in my ordinary state of interest, it flows at a rate which becomes for me the normal rate of time-speed. Thus in the last resort, degree of interest is the subjective measure of time rates.

We pass now to a less obvious consideration. Time, we have said, is a rate; but being such, it involves a somewhat against which it may be measured. Thus, in like manner, a spatial movement must be measured against spatial points of relative permanence. It follows, then, that whenever there is the experience of a duration, or time-flow, there must likewise be the experience of that against which the duration is measured. What is this standard of reference? We are inclined at first to answer 'the timeless'; but while the timeless is undoubtedly the standard of *definition* of time, it cannot be the standard of *rate-measurement*. A rate is a ratio, and a ratio must consist of terms that are the same in kind. Hence a duration must be measured against a duration. In other words, just as a spatial movement is measured, not against the spaceless, but against the permanent in space, so a time-flow is measured, not against that which is *not* time, but against the permanent *in* time.

By the permanent in time, however, we cannot mean the absolutely permanent, but only that which is as permanent as a position within time permits. In other words, temporal permanence is a permanence of time-rate. The temporal permanent, in other words, is the time-rate which is the most continuous possible. It should follow, then, in strict theory, that all our duration-rates, faster and slower, are measured, in the last resort, against the rate which is the most continuous possible. As a statement of our experience, however, this conclusion should be slightly modified: the duration which actually serves us as standard is not necessarily the most continuous possible, but the most continuous within our experience. Such most continuous time-rate is, then, the normal standard of time-measurement. Thus, to sum up, every duration is a rate, more or less changing, measured against a rate that changes least.

All this, however, is introductory to our main point, which can

now be briefly stated. If it is true that the experience of a duration is *ipso facto* the experience of at least two durations of different rates, and if, as we have already shown, difference of duration-rate is, in all our experience, dependent upon difference of intensity of interest, it follows that every experience of a duration involves differences of intensity of interest.

An obvious inference, then, is that where there are no such differences of interest there is no time-flow. Whether, however, this inference be justified or not, it nevertheless remains true that our time-consciousness, because it is a 'rate of passing,' involves the peculiar subjective imperfection of different intensities of interest.¹

In two respects, then, we have found time-consciousness to involve defect: first, in so far as it exhibits perspective immediacy; second, in so far as it is durational. In both cases the subjective side of the objective illusion is seen to lie in 'unevenness' of interest. It would seem to follow, then, that, if the time-illusion is to be escaped or even corrected, it must be in so far as the subjective defect is correspondingly lessened or removed.

III.

To express, however, the full force of our conclusion, and to make clear the manner in which the time-illusion is to be corrected, it will be necessary to note, briefly, the extent to which difference of intensity of interest involves defect of consciousness. Degree of interest, we may say, is simply the sign of the extent to which one places oneself at the service of the experience. If, for example, I am very much interested in the development of a certain argument, I bring all the powers of my person to bear; I suffer no distractions; I forget that I am a physical being requiring food and rest; I force my whole nature into the service of the present situation. And I do so in order that no jot or tittle of real significance may escape me. When, on the other hand, I am indifferent to an argument, I allow its details to pass by without making any great effort to understand them; I attend only through a peep-hole of my person. The real power that I have, I hold

¹ That the presence of different intensities of interest is a defect will be shown below.

in reserve, as not worth spending upon the present argument. Thus the difference of intensity of interest is simply the measure of what fullness of my person I am willing to yield to the situation in question.

We may note, now, how this difference of interest affects the worth of our judgments. When I attend to any content with an indifferent interest, I am regarding it only with partial powers ; hence I may or may not be doing justice to the content in question. Since I make no real effort to comprehend the content, I cannot know whether I am doing justice to it or not. My lack of interest may arise out of the fact that the subject is not interesting to me, or, again, out of the fact that it is not interesting in itself. When, now, as in the first case, I refuse to exercise my powers of attention simply because I, in my private subjectivity, have no interest in the matter, it is clear that whatever judgments I make respecting it are made upon inadequate knowledge. When, on the other hand, I declare that the matter in itself has no interest, it is a question how I may know this unless I have placed all my intelligent power at its service. So long as my interest remains at low ebb, I have no means of saying whether a matter is objectively of significance or not. In order, then, that I may do justice, I must, in every case, intensify my interest to the highest degree possible. Or, to anticipate an obvious objection, where the value of a thing is slight, it does not follow that my interest in it may rightly be slight ; for the slight value may only be justly estimated where my interest has become as full as possible ; that is, only where the complete power of my person has been placed at its service.

It should be clear, then, that only in so far as a self is present with perfect fullness of interest in each detail of its consciousness are its judgments perfect judgments. In other words, the perfect self must be its total self in every phase of itself ; it must, to use the paradoxical phrases, be a whole in every part and every part the whole. The peculiar defect of human life is that the human self is always a divided self ; its *total* self is never in evidence, while even its divisions are not distributed with impartial favor. I feel, for example, that most of my conscious self is

in this present moment and in this local 'here'; and I give only vague shreds of myself to other moments and other regions. Obviously, then, if I am to escape this imperfection, the line of my advance must be to rescue myself from this fragmentary dividedness, and to realize, more and more nearly, my whole self in every phase of my experience. But this, as we may now see, may be accomplished only as I eliminate from my life different intensities of interest. This does not mean, of course, that I eliminate different values, but simply that, in my attempt to judge values, I give always to my judgment the whole power of my person.

Such wholeness in every part, indeed, is what we must mean by a perfect person; and it should be clear now why we must regard such a person as timeless. His timelessness is not an inexplicable metaphysical quality; it is simply the expression of the perfection of his spiritual nature. His interest is, in every respect, *entire*; he lives his total self in every detail of his conscious life. In this sense, he is 'perfect love'; that is, he gives always of his whole self; he retains no private 'core' of himself, no sacred 'ego' for his own special and unshareable love. Or, to return to the phrasing of the argument, he suffers neither the illusion of perspective immediacy nor the illusion of duration. Thus he is timeless, because, in spirit, he is *whole*.

The corollary with respect to human striving should now be clear. If difference of intensity of interest is in truth a defect, the aim of life, obviously, must be to correct the defect by making interest entire. The human spirit must heal its mechanical divisions, transcend its special loves and special interests, and be its whole self in every part of itself, a spirit one and undivided. Granted, then, that time is but the expression of such differences of intensity of interest, the remedying of the subjective evil will be the effective means for the removal of the time-illusion. Thus time is to be escaped, not by an external act of removal, but by an inner growth into wholeness of life.¹

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This paper would be sadly misleading, of course, if it left the impression that, by a mere conscious act of will to remove differences of interest, the time-illusion could

be directly escaped. This would be true if difference of interest were wholly the result of our conscious and voluntary acts. Undoubtedly, in large measure, it is such ; and, in so far, it needs but rightly directed effort to overcome unevenness of interest. But there are also large regions of our life in which the interest-quality is as yet beyond our direct control. For example, I am not and cannot be as immediately interested in the movements of the sun and the stars as I am in the course of my own thoughts and emotions. The explanation lies in the two-fold fact, first, that I do not know the sun and stars as intimately as I know myself ; and second, that I cannot control them as I can control myself. It matters little what I think or do about them ; my little knowledge and my little effort are unable to affect their existence in the slightest way. Hence my interest in them is distant and unvarying. Indeed, it is just because of this normally distant and unvarying interest that I can use them as standards of spatial movement and of time-rate. If my interest in the sun were as intense and varying as my interest in my loves and hates, I should have to seek elsewhere for my standard rate. Thus, lack of knowledge and lack of control are productive of a low degree of interest. Obviously, then, the intensifying of such interest is not possible by a mere act of will, but only by increase of knowledge and of control. Again, there are great regions of our life where we lack, not control, since control does not properly belong to us here, but understanding. The whole world of my fellow-men outside of my small circle, the world of beings below and above them, are only distantly of interest to me, because I really do not know them. I cannot, therefore, place my *whole* self at their service unless I know them as deeply as is possible. To sum the whole matter up, then, if the time-illusion is the result of a divided self, of different intensities of interest, it can be corrected only as we achieve the *utmost possible intimacy* with our world. Such utmost intimacy, being ultimately the life of each in all, is the intimacy of perfect love. Thus, in the last resort, the escape from the time-illusion is by the inward path of a perfect love.